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"Married or not?". Reflections on fieldwork in Botiza (Romania)

(Very early draft!! Please, do not quote without author's permission)

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a personal reflection about a particular aspect of my PhD work. The topic of my research is the analyses of the interactions that are part of the ethnographic encounter that is realized through practises and narratives risen from specific issues such as locality, tradition and search for the past[1]. Performances and relations, narratives and encounters are about hosts and guests, however they do comprehend also myself, my being there as guest – researcher – non –tourist. My research did not focus on gender issues specifically, hence this paper represents a firstr and initial reflections about the relation between gender and ethnography which will need further development

I feel I can claim that there was a sort of 'evolution' in the way local people have accepted me: from the tourist that wandered here and there to an observing subject whose presence in "their field" had a research and study motivation that gave me a different status from the foreigners who were there in their village, in their houses, …

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[1] See Cipollari (2005a) and (2005b).

on holiday. Between these two (opposite) positions I lived a long (in terms of time) phase during which my presence was a sort of hybrid. Being associated to the local family I lived with had two kinds of consequences: on the one side, it allowed me to enter the emotional sphere / feelings of the family life; and on the other side, it obliged me to take responsibilities and duties as any family member. Therefore I was in the middle between collaboration, linguistic mediators (between locals and tourists) and family life, with it implies. These identities have allowed me to work on my research, switching from a pure and simple observation to forms of participations that consented me to enter the locality, with its spoken and unspoken world.

This is not new to anthropologists, nor it belongs only to specific researches, it is rather the constitutive essence of the ethnographic method in different contexts.

The different ways I was from times to times called, introduced, labelled, appointed… represent at the same time the levels of intimacy to which I was somehow promoted. As Satta (2001: 163) observes during his fieldwork, social relationships with informants locate the researcher in the space where he/she can act, move, perform. The area in which I could move freely was subordinated by the ways people named me.

Before focusing on the issues of my positioninig in the fieldwork I will introduce the main points of my research, in order to give the reader a sort of framework where to picture more easily the questions discussed.

FRAMEWORK

My PhD the research was aimed at analysing the dynamics of relations occurring when tourists and local people meet[2].

Doing fieldwork in a specific area, I studied the processes of social and cultural transformations which tourism introduces in a rural context essentially based on micro-economy and popular traditions. Moreover, I examined the dynamics activated by tourists' encounter with the local community, bearing in mind that this encounter is often mediated and influenced by other subjects, such as the institutions that promote, organize and manage tourist offer both at local and at international level.

Area

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[2] I held my fieldwork over one year and half in three different periods starting from summer 1999, about five years after the first forms of organized rural tourism - which I examined - appeared.

The research takes place in Maramureş[3]: a mountain region situated in the Northwestern part of Romania, which occupies a vast area of the Eastern Carpathians. Since the Seventies, Maramureş has been mentioned by the Romanian Ministry of Tourism for its landscapes and for its local traditions that have been widely studied in a great number of folklore and popular traditions researches by a lot of anthropologists, both Romanian and not[4]. In the Nineties, interest in tourism increased due to post-revolution politics aimed at promoting tourism at different levels: organizational, legislative, national and international educational.

In 1989 the PHARE Programme (a programme for communitarian aid to Eastern and Central European countries) invested in local development. At the beginning the projects did not focus directly on tourism but little by little some actions started to be dedicated to the promotion and the development of local tourism.

In 1993 Romania entered Eurogites, a European federation for the development of tourism and the promotion of rural habitat, enacted thanks to European Union funds and the PHARE project (Bran, Marin and Simion 1997: 128). In order to support this activity, the Romanian government has established new tax regulations for tourism businesses, sometimes giving credits to those farmers who decide to invest and to restore their houses for touristic purposes[5].

Since 1994 two major associations have been registered at the Minister of Tourism and Agriculture and have organized rural tourism in Maramureş: ANTREC[6] and O.V.R.[7].

Ethnography - subjects

One of the features of tourism in Maramureş is the limited capacity of reception. This fact, together with a very limited system of public transports and information centres, necessarily leads to smaller and easily manageable tourist presence and to a

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[3] The current administrative land is much smaller than it has been in the past: about two third of its territory belong to Ukraine; the present borders were defined by law n. 2 in 1968.
[4] Just to mention the works I reffered most see: Cuisenier (1995 and 2000); Mesnil and Mihailescu (1998); Mesnil (2003); Papa, Pizza and Zerilli (2003)
[5] Law 145/1994 deals with economic support for tourism development in mountain areas, in the Danube delta and along the coast (Government decree n. 62/24 August1994; Ministry of Tourism decree n. 20/1995, referring to regulations and criteria for the classification of houses and far-holidays structures) (Bran, Marin and Simon 1997: 128).
[6] The National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism in Romania (ANTREC) has contributed to change rural potential into a wealthy business and to promote certain regions as a tourist potential both in Romania and abroad.
[7] The O.V.R. Agro-Tur-Art foundation ("Opération Villages Roumain / agriculture, tourism, handicraft) appeared for the first time after the 1989 revolution. Its main purpose was to react against Ceausescu's reforms leading to rural areas becoming relatively poorer and the cities being overcrowded as housing construction fell behind the reformation targets. Nowadays the O.V.R. acts on three complementary sectors: agriculture, tourism and handicraft.

customised interaction of tourists with the environment and the local community. We may assume that tourism development only marginally alters local equilibrium, it represents an opportunity for the local community to relate and to compare with the outside world, as well as an opportunity for economic and structural improvement. Some local houses have been selected according to parameters belonging to those countries with an old tradition in tourist management (such as Belgium and France). Host families have then a fundamental role in linking two worlds: on the one side they represent to tourists the foreign family with whom they share the house; on the other side they represent the entire community of which that family is only a part.

All the subjects mentioned above (hosts, guests, intermediaries, local community) represent *the interlocutors of my research*. They were both men and women each one with a personal role both in the family and in the tourist management. My informants were middle age people, again both men and women, all married and with children mostly younger than me. Interacting with young people was more difficult for various reasons. First of all, young families rarely run a guest house because women are too busy with young children; secondly, - on the average - unmarried people are still studying in university towns; thirdly, students who visit their families during school holiday are kept busy by their parents who ask them to cope with a lot of works, to return for the money received for their education.

The observation of their practises and their everyday interactions has allowed me to observe what, in anthropology of tourism, we call "tourist encounter", one of the factors that "make tourism especially relevant to anthropology" (Stronza 2001: 264).

The question of the encounter is, then, "the core" of the anthropological analyses and it constitutes the main topic of my research[8]. Behind the term "encounter" there is a quite complex and multi-faceted reality. The tourist who goes to Botiza enters somebody else's world and with this "otherness" he/she has to *share time and space*. From reception to allocation to different houses, from meals to life at home or to the visit at craftsmen workshops, hosts and guests enter a constant relationship with each other.

Tourists choose Maramureş as a family holiday, most frequently I met couples or families with children. This brings to a sort of "familiar" hospitality, as if the tourists are visiting relatives. It is quite common that the women tend to get to know each other and the tourist one will soon try to be of help to her host. Men might also try to communicate – though this is less frequent – and sometimes share some house hard

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[8] Nash too claimed: "Since tourism involves travel, a cross-cultural (or subcultural) encounter is inevitably produced, and it is the social transaction involved in this encounter that provides a key to the anthropological understanding of tourism […] it is the encounter between hosts and tourists which constitutes the core of a touristic system" (Nash 1981: 462).

works (or even field work). Sometimes tourists might be composed of groups of friends or of organised pre-packed groups. In these cases it is less common to get to any kind of a closer relationship, though the spaces to be shared are the same.

On the rare occasions when the tourist is a single traveller, family life is not so much shared or explored from both sides. In the case of the tourist being a woman, it is possible that the host family tends to be protective towards her. This leads mainly to two sorts of reactions: the tourists might enjoy this "warm" hospitality and accept local "presence" in her holiday plan, or – most common – interact as less as possible with the family and spend time on her own, trekking or visiting nearby villages.

POSITIONING

In this session I want to introduce the question of my being in the field. As soon as I arrived in Botiza I was 'part of the game' together with the local people and the tourists I kept observing, talking to and living with. In this session I will try to show the ways of "my" encounter. The encounter between my self non –tourist that encounters tourists, myself as guest but not on vacation, as a visitor that works, a worker whose activity is rather difficult for local people to understand fully.

I will reflect upon the ambiguities of my "being there" and the ways I adopted each time to overcome the difficulties that came along.

During my fieldwork I lived with three different local families: the Mihai, the Petrov and the Petric[9]. The first time I have ever been to Botiza I was travelling with my husband and some friends. We asked to the local information bureau, as suggested by the Rough Guide (I discover later that it was the OVR office), and we were directed to the Mihai's. During this first and rather short stay I was treated as a tourist normally is: coddled / pampered and fed in a very pleasant and relaxing way.

On a second journey, I asked for a different family (Petric), just for the curiosity to see other people. Same experience: a pleasant welcome and comfortable stay. The next year, when I returned to Botiza to conduct fieldwork I managed to stay with the second family met, but I anticipated a bit my arrival and for a few days I was hosted at the Petrov's. In future and any time I retuned I lived with the Petric.

For what it concerns the ways I was hosted the most evident difference I observed ("on my skin") and personally experienced was between the first two families and the third one. Beside the warm and cheerful hospitality I received quite similarly from the

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[9] I will give them three nik-names in order to make clear whom I refere to during the paper.

three families, I was surprised to observe the ways my explanations of my being there was taken. For what it concerns the first two families there was little or no reaction/response to my explaining why and what for I was going to live there for such a long time (compared to the 4 to 7 days usual tourist stay). Neither my long term home rent, nor my continuous questions provoked much reactions on my hosts, in particular at the beginning. I was being considered one of those "ethnic" or "cultural" tourists that bombards them with questions because they are interested in local life.

Thinking over it, I realize that both at the beginning and at the end, of my staying in Botiza, my appearance was less similar to the village women than tourists. In this respect a tourist is much less gendered than a local people. The fact of wearing casual most the times, either short or long trousers and nearly always sporting style, makes a lot of tourists quite similar. Apart from one dress and one skirt, both very simple, I only had trousers in by baggage. Also if I wanted to dress similarly to local women I would not be able to, since people make clothes by themselves. A few times I was given traditional dresses to wear, but anybody could say I was not local. From my glasses to my shoes, from my watch to my shaved legs I simply looked like a foreign women wearing local clothes. In this case old women liked me more, as if I deeper accepted their traditions, young women found me funny and "too traditional[10]", men, both young or elder found me of no interest at all.

Besides the physical appearances, the fact of being alone made me different from tourists who, as said before, normally travel in couples or with families. However, there might be single women visiting this area, they are always asked the reasons for their travelling alone. And I was not an exception. I will come back later on this issue. Moreover, my position on the field as different from other tourists was obviously clearer to locals by my returning to the field.

In Botiza it is not uncommon that tourists return year after year, they show particular interest in knowing aspects of local life and they usually ask questions. However, even though I introduced myself explaining at the beginning the reasons I was there for, that is my research, I found that there was little if no interests in my interlocutors about this. Very few people continued on my 'introductory' argument asking more information and details about my work. The arguments local people preferred me to talk about were mainly related to my personal life such as: where I came from, my marital status, information about my husband. Being an 'object' of local anthropology (reverse relations) could allow me to establish a long-standing relations with people.

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[10] They mix elements of modern with traditional clothes, for example hig-heel shoes with sunday's skirts, the complete traditional dress is worn either by older people or on special occasions.

Through those relations I was enabled to build up my ethnography, even though the topic of my investigation had nothing to do with the initial arguments – gender and personal issues.

Somehow I was conscious that if I wanted to gain access to households and people's knowledge I had to give an image of myself that would help in building a bridge between me and they. Therefore I always tried to acted as a cheerfully and helpfully as I could, willing to cooperate with house works and to take part to family programmes. People's expectation towards my gender was partially conditioning because, after all, I was foreigner and married. On the one side, being a foreigner, gave me the freedom to avoid some local commitment, for example I was not expected to attend the mess regularly; on the other side, being married relieved my hosts from being responsible of me, that is in case of an inappropriate behaviour I had an husband to respond to. Of course, things are never so easy and straightforward, but on the overall this can be considered the initial image of my positioning.

In this paper I can clearly claim that whenever I realized and reflected about it my positioning, I felt uncomfortable and unease about it. Even though I interacted nicely and helpfully with local people, I was honest and crystal clear on answering their curiosity and, I know, I left a good remember of myself to several people, I was never completely giving them an image of myself that, both at that time and now, I believe constitutes me: being an (emancipated) female researcher. I could express that easier to tourists that I met for short periods, than to the people I lived with for months.

Different "admittances".

Quite differently, the Petrov family being less used in receiving tourists, showed - since the very beginning - an evident curiosity toward myself and the reason I was there. Before I could start asking about them the whole family tried to understand bits of my life, my work and my plans while in their village. I found myself completely absorbed in trying to explain things about anthropology, ethnography, fieldwork, tourism research and all the arguments that could arise from the presentation of my work and the explanation of my presence there through a rather limited set of vocabulary because at the beginning my Romanian was quite poor. Once we overcame the understanding of the basic anthropology facts their curiosity turned on my personal life, family, education as if this was the moment to make a sort of x-ray on me, before allowing me to enter their world.

Later, during my fieldwork, I realised that what happened with this family was exactly what anthropologists do to their informant.

I was asked all the important information, all the data that they thought important in order to know me. Only after my full and exhaustive explanation about myself I was allowed by the Petrov to enter their world. In fact, just after a few days I arrived at the Petrov's I was invited to participate to a marriage with them. I was made to wear their family's traditional wedding clothes and was allowed to participate to the women's bride preparation before the marriage. As a matter of fact, after a long and in depth sort of *interviews* by most of the members of this family, I was somehow considered with familiarity[11]. To their eyes, I was of no danger, I was interested in them and their lives, I was being considered somebody with whom they could share their house and life. The distance between *me* and *them* was quickly overcome though their ways of admitting me, which was testing me and my willingness to answer their questions.

Besides the marriage invitation, I found no problem in letting them accepting my presence in various circumstances. Even though I lived with them for quite a short while I joined them into the field were they worked daily not only when I was with them but also in several other occasions.

Answering to local people's questions about myself was a sort of prelude to the relationship I wanted to get in order to work on my research. I found it a sort of "questionnaire" I could cope with and after a while I expected it. I also found I should not try to hide from it since in some way it would be a sort of "pre-paying" for what I was going to ask, their time and their information. It could be considered a sort of mutual and fair exchange, time for time, "information for information". How could or should ask them time and helpfulness if I myself was not willing to give them mine?

Sometimes, I reflected on the work of the ethnographer. If I got used to a certain slot of questions and found particularly easy answering them, sometimes even using similar explanations, what would then be my interlocutor's reactions to my questions to them. Beside the tourists, who rarely meet again and have little opportunities to talk about me, local people do discuss about my presence there, would they also prepare a sort of series of answers to my questions? Would they also compare my questions to them and find each time a common way of answering?

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[11] This is situation fits Macintyre's (1993) challenging question: "Fictive kinship or mistaken identity?", in which she reflects upon being taken as 'fictive kin'. As a kin, anytime I returned to Botiza I went to greet them and they always expected this from me, as they do from any relative that goes to Botiza. Moreover, anytime I left Botiza I was asked to give them a call once I reached home, so they felt sure I was safe somewhere. The only time I was not clearly asked for this phonecall, was the time I went to visit them with my husband, as if my travelling with him could guarantee them of my safeness.

DIFFERENT IDENTITIES

I will now turn back to describe my presence with the Petric's. Living with them for most of my stay obviously allowed me to enter their household differently than other tourists. However, with this family it was necessary a long period of each other's observation and getting to know before they allowed me to participate to their own private family activities. As for the marriage event, I was invited to a marriage by the Petric's just after more than a month I was there. In this occasion I was clearly introduced to people as their *musafir* (guest).

At that time the term "guest" sounded rather ambiguous since I could still be a simple paying "guest" or a personal family guest, such as other people they received from times to times. In Botiza, people call *musafir* relatives or friends who come to visit and are lodged in the same house. Even when I would be considered a 'member of the family', I would be introduced to other people as *musafir*. It was hard for me to distinguish when somebody was a tourist on his second journey, therefore named *musafir* or a guest invited by somebody of the family, for example when children go back home during holiday they may travel with some city friends, even those who have moved from Botiza to a city and are married may visit their parents with some families, *musafir* again. Basically, I had (still have) no cues in telling if a *musafir* is considered a closer relation but still a guest that will pay for the service, or somebody invited by the family. When my husband came to visit me, he was considered a *musafir* but my position of a 'member of the family' was not extended to him. He was not asked to help or to talk about himself, he was of no interest apart from being my husband. However, we as a couple were treated as family members, we had to say where we would go and call in case we would go home later that we said.

The different ways the two families acted in several events allowed me to live different experiences. On the one side, the spontaneous curiosity toward a stranger and secondly the genuine acceptance of the other included his/her involvement in family practises; on the other side, the familiarity with the stranger due to a longer and more structured tourism activity led to a more distant and formal relationship. As I already said, in due course of time, I entered the family life as well, but it was a long and accurate work from my side.

Entering the backstage of the Petrov was a sort of full immersion in a rite of passage (Turner), once I emerged from their testing me I was part of the family. On the contrary with the Petric I was able to enter the backstage once I made myself accepted as one of the family rather that as a long term tourist.

In both cases people have always been nice and respectful to me, but the efforts I made to penetrate their personal and familiar boundaries have been of different degrees. The Petric's are quite used to cope with tourists, they manage to speak a little bit of French and to manage basic conversations with tourists.

As soon as I was considered one of their *musafir*, I was allowed to put a step forward in their *backstage* (MacCannell 1989). For example I could eat in the kitchen with them, go to the market and see the butcher cut a little cow for them, followe them in the fields, observe their preparing the room for new tourists, follow the daughter in relatives' house and joine her in girl's afternoon teas, I helped them in several of these and other activities, I shared some of their sorrows and finally I was called *pui mami* (mother's chicken) when I expressed homesickness. It is a fact that I got access to these practises not only because I was considered a *musafir*, also for my being a woman. Probably if I was not married I would be pushed to go out with unmarried girls in their 'village walks' where they can watch and be watched by unmarried boys.

MARRIED STATUS

The question I still "hear" in my mind (remember) clearly when I think of all the times I met somebody new in the village (local, not a tourist) is "*singura sau casatorita?*", that literally means "single or married"? Marital status divides local women into two groups: being married means running a house, taking decisions, being less dependent from the parents but more from the husband. I never think of myself as a married woman, particularly in that situation I thought of me as an Italian PhD researcher, a student of anthropology of tourism, "a young and intrepid fieldworker" is the imagine I liked most of myself. Being married was something I had left aside on the field because, on my mind, it is a condition that has nothing or little to do with work. Reality turned out that this idea was nothing more wrong. The category of "married woman" encompassed all the others as well as gender, as a way of defining identity through relational processes, is something I learnt during my fieldwork (Caplan 1993).

At that time I was 25 years old and according to local costume /use I was supposed to be married and possibly already have a chid. Once assured the I was married the second big issue would be to understand why I was alone there. There should be some good reason (or rather some sort of problem) for being so far from home alone, that is without my husband. Quite often when I explained that due to work reason we had to live apart from times to times, my interlocutors asked questions in order to

discover if my husband agreed on my being away and openly mentioned the fact that I should have better doubt to expect him to wait for me once back at home. According to them my husband could have agreed on my leave, but that did not mean that later he would still wait for my going back, he might have changed idea and found another women. Once I got used to this kind of comments and once I understood that is was actually a reflections of local practises and strategies and not a personal consideration I found it a sort of routine, a 'game' that I was willing to play to start a conversation.

During the months I spent in Botiza my position has evolved from that of a particularly interested tourist (sometimes maybe obtrusive) (most of the local hosts are used in answering tourists questions and fulfil their curiosities) to the one of "the Petric's guest". This being a sort of mutual advantage. On their side, the Petric's where the lucky ones who had a long term paying guest, a personal language translator, and, by times, the nice girl that a lot of family would not mind to "adopt". On my side, I hade no more need to clarify where I was living, with whom and sometimes, by saying "the Petric's guest", people already knew who I was I what I was there for.

Obviously, at each different status I acquired, I observed different attitudes and expectations. For example, tourists are free to spend their time as they whish both outside and inside the guest-house. On the contrary, sometimes I was asked to participate to the moments of interactions between hosts and guests even though I would have not done so in that precise moment.

Sometimes my presence was clearly requested by the Petrics for various reasons: from a need of translation, or in order to show and explain tourists the exibition room (carpets, art-crafts) or even to sell carpets or receive guests on their behalf, for example if they had to be working away. I remember once I got particularly annoyed by somebody who came to knock at the bathroom door (while I was taking a shower) because they needed my translation with a tourist who could not understand them. I realised then that the boundaries between my presence in particular situations for my personal interest or my being there for my guests' request was becoming narrow.

During my fieldwork, boundaries between myself as a person and myself as a researcher have been constantly shifting. If, on the one side, I wanted to observe tourists and their guests and their inter-reactions /encounters/ shared practises, (I frequently asked people to introduce me, or to let me participate to these events), on the other side, I wanted to feel free to decide whether something was of interest to me or not.

Sharing experiences may constitute a base for identification and a way for being accepted (Macintyre 1993), however it may also bring to ambiguous and demanding situations that the researcher has to cope with.

FINAL REMARK

At this point I should admit that anytime I reflect upon my fieldwork I keep separating "me" and "them". Each time this separation is done with different people and therefore the boundaries are different. Closeness and distance changes according to the people I refer to. However, the distinction persists. What Fortier (1996: 307) calls "dualist and oppositional" relation is what has happened to me and local people.

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